



## AUTISM CLASSROOM RESOURCES PODCAST

### EPISODE 30: PREPARING FOR SCHOOL CLOSURES IN SPECIAL ED

URL: <http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode30>

Welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. I'm Chris Reeve and as I am recording this, we are in the midst of the Covid19 pandemic that has shut down schools in many states and across the world. And did we plan for this? Of course not. So this has been very sudden and unexpected. But then even if we have changes in the school calendar due to weather or due to illness (like when schools shut down because of an outbreak of flu), it's always unexpected.

I think what has surprised me so much at this time is just how fast things are changing. At the beginning of the week most schools weren't closed. By the end of the week, most were or were planning for it.

Whether you are in the midst of this particular pandemic closure or are just experiencing closures due to a regular flu epidemic or extended weather closings, I think this episode will still hold up with tips for preparing your students to leave and return from school. It also may give you some ideas of things to send home with students and ways to communicate with families during the hiatus.

### COVID 19 SCHOOL CLOSURE

To give you some context, if you are listening to this at a later time, every school is different in their expectations of work for the students. Some teachers have told me there are no expectations for preparing work. Some of you are preparing for digital online learning and wondering what that looks like for our students with severe disabilities. Others are being told to send home paper-based work that students can do. Still others are told to prepare for X weeks of learning and there are no specifications. And finally therapists and behavior analysts are trying to figure out what their role might be able how they do therapy in this way. Let's just hear it for how all of us really crave a little structure in our lives right now.



## EPISODE 30: PREPARING FOR SCHOOL CLOSURE

So, in today's episode I thought I might help with some ideas and resources to maybe give us all a little structure in this somewhat chaotic situation or whatever similar time you find yourself in.

I have two main areas I'm going to focus on today. First I want to talk about how we can help support our students in general when there are unexpected changes and potential lack of structure. This might be during a hurricane if you live in Florida where I do. Or it might be an extended absence from school for weather. Or it could be our current situation with Covid19.

Next I will talk about what we might want to send home or do to help families support our students during the break or what we want them to implement for learning over that time.


Let's get started.

### STRATEGIES TO PREPARE STUDENTS FOR SCHOOL CLOSURE

#### I. Social Stories About School Closure

Preparing our students for upcoming changes is really nice when we have the chance. But even if we don't have time to prep them for the change beforehand, strategies like social stories or social narratives can be helpful. They can ease some of the anxiety caused by the sudden changes. Information is useful for all of us. Just look at how many hits websites like the CDC and other health-related resources have to know that we crave information to make sense of a situation. Our students are no different.

You can help by giving them information about the situation at a level that they can understand that. Social narratives may provide that and also help them identify the feelings that they are having. They can even provide them with some coping strategies to help them digest the information and understand what is happening.



In the blog post for this podcast I'll put some links to a variety of social stories that can be helpful for COVID19 and will come back when other situations arise to share more.

## 2. Keep Routines as Normal as Possible.

And keep students as engaged in meaningful activities as possible. I've just pointed out how much we all crave structure and that's no different for our students. I also know how hard it is to try to keep things normal when nothing SEEMS normal. However, being off the routine is one thing that strikes anxiety for many us and our students. So, while you are gearing up to dismiss for a break or after the students return, work hard to get back on the schedule or keep the schedule going as much as you can. It's easy to just let the structure go in times like these. But, in the end, keeping to the structure will decrease and prevent problem behavior.


## 3. Use More Visuals Before School Closures and At Home

I always say that if your students need visual supports in a regular, everyday setting, they need MORE supports in new settings or situations. For that reason, consider sending visuals home with the student. If they need the visual supports in your classroom, being home when they would usually be in class is going to be a very new situation for them. Having visual supports that can show them what they are going to do today can be helpful.

## 4. Answer questions as honestly as possible.

This kind of goes without saying. However, if you have students who are asking about the virus, the weather, when school will be back in session, answer them with the best information you have. Some of you don't know when your students are going back to school. It's ok to tell them that but let them know that their parents will be notified. And let them know that their parents will tell them as soon as they have information. The more calmly and fully we can answer questions, the more calm our students will be. They take their cue from us as adults.

## 5. Back Up to Easier Tasks Before and After School Closure



It's ok to back up a bit on tasks and do more maintenance tasks. When preparing for a school dismissal or coming back from one, it's ok to back up a bit and work on easier tasks. I don't know about you, but I tend to gravitate towards things that are easier for me to do when I'm anxious. For example, I was half way through preparing the stuff for my accountant for my taxes when all the school closings began. I'm not too sure when I'm going to get back to that.


We and our students can only handle so much stress at a time. Adding new material that they are not confident about on top of the anxiety about whether they will get sick, or their parents will get sick, or when school will start again among other things will only compound the anxiety. So it's OK to go a little easy. And when you send home work, think about that as well. Maybe send home more maintenance tasks than new material for students to work on. Because trust me...many of them work better for you than they do for their parents.

## 6. Focus on the good things

The people working together to prevent the spread of disease. The opportunity to spend more time with family. That your family is safe from a natural disaster. I realize that everything is not sunshine and roses, trust me. Especially if you are listening to this after a natural disaster or expecting one. But in general, the more that we find the good in things, the less anxious and more productive we can be. For your older students, try to discourage them from getting caught up in social media. It tends to spread lots of rumors and tragedies that we can't control. Hopefully as adults we know how to weed through all that, but many times our students do not.

## SENDING HOME WORK DURING SCHOOL CLOSURE

So now let's focus a bit on getting materials prepared for students who are going to be out of school for extended times. For many of our students with severe disabilities, we need to be thinking outside the box to determine how to help them remain engaged in learning at home during school closures. Instead of paper and pencil or digital resources, it might be a calendar of activities families can do with their child that integrate communication skills



practice or life skills practice. Here are some ideas of things to send home or put on course management systems like Canvas or Moodle.

## 1. Do You Use Unique or News2You?

If your students are accessing online materials and you use the Unique Learning System and/or News2You, remember that they have student log ins that you can set up with materials for them to practice. You can even get data from their work on their log in pages. Right now, ULS has remote learning professional development set up that you can access to show how to get them set up.

## 2. Free Resource Library Resources


I have a blog post that gathers resources from my Free Resource library with tips on how families can use them at home. They are not whole units but many are templates that can be used with different lessons to be used throughout the time off from school. In addition, I've made changes to my Terms of Use for all of my products (free and paid) that you are allowed to put them on e-learning platforms as long as the student has to log in and the student / family is the one with access. And you can send them home to families of the students on your caseload. You still can't share them on Facebook or a community drive within your school or out, but I want you to be able to share the tools the way they are needed.

## 3. Send Home Visuals

For students with autism and related disabilities, consider sending home visuals that you have found to be effective for your students but that would apply to the home environment. That might include visuals for using the bathroom and washing their hands. It might be leisure or recess schedules they could use to structure time for their children at home. I have free leisure schedules in my TPT store that you can download and send home. Check the blog post for that exact link.

## 4. Make a Plan for Activities

Consider making a calendar of activities for your students or perhaps a daily schedule of the work they need to do at home. It could be a life skills



calendar of activities that students can do around the house each day to practice skills. Something like, Monday, cook with mom (using a visual recipe). Tuesday plant a seed and document its care and growth. Wednesday, do a web search for local health department to see what their responsibilities are in the community. Thursday, take a nature walk and pick up things you see. Play I Spy on the walk and then bring the items home and work on describing them. This could be a verbal or a written activity. Friday, complete a printable activity from the cooking activity.

## 5. Send Videos Home If Possible

Finally if you have the time, consider making some quick videos (don't have to be fancy) of you working with their student implementing 1 skill that you want them to continue to work on. Will every parent do it? Of course not. Will some? Yes, probably. Either way you will know that you have shown them where the student is at with the skill and how you are teaching it. Send home the needed materials for continuing to work on that skill. Choose activities that will fit into their daily life like learning to wash their hands, doing a chore around the house, identifying common objects they find at home.

## CONCLUSION

There are tons of things the students can do at home that I keep thinking of, but these at least will give you some ideas to get you started. And just think, once we create 2 weeks of home-lessons for our students, we'll have them for the next time or when a student is out for medical reasons. Yes, sometimes I am a Pollyanna.

In any case, thank you so much for listening. Check the resources to get links to freebies and the links to the items in the resource library. And come join our free Facebook group at [specialeducatorsconnection.com](https://www.facebook.com/specialeducatorsconnection) for more freebies and tips that I share. You can also follow me on social media at autism classroom news on Facebook and [autismclassroomresources](https://www.instagram.com/autismclassroomresources) on Instagram.

Stay safe and stay healthy. I'll be back next week.